More Than Travel – Selling Trust and Service

FAMILY-RUN, FAMILY-ORIENTED EXPRESS TRAVEL FOCUSES ON CLIENT DETAILS, TRUSTS SABRE FOR THEIR TOTAL GDS SOLUTION

Moms are the world’s greatest organizers.

Need someone to put together a family road trip? Ask three moms. They’ve got every detail, they know all the people, and providing care and comfort comes naturally. Moms even make sure you have your favorite breakfast cereal. More on that later.

In Miami, in the 1980s, for help in planning a trip you would’ve asked stay-at-home moms Olga Ramudo and her sister Cristina Jacomino. One winter, these carpool whizzes organized a Colorado ski trip for 30 parents and 120 kids. The trip – arranged through a small South Miami travel agency – was a hit. Everybody wanted to go again. People kept signing up for later trips until one of the excursions had 500 skiers.

The agency quickly saw how valuable this dynamic duo was and made them independent agents. Next-door neighbors Ramudo and Jacomino passed a beeper back and forth to serve clients, most secured by word of mouth. When one of the skiers asked them to handle corporate travel, they expected to keep busy. But they had no idea, when they said they’d help, that the company had 600 skiers.

“While I think we sell most is trust, the trust that we will do the best for our clients,” Ramudo says. “We place the same kind of trust in Sabre and their tools.”

AMONG THE INDUSTRY’S BEST

So, in 1989, they got rid of the beeper, Rosa Maria Delgado joined as a partner, and they founded Express Travel. The company has grown nicely. They now have 31 agents, and most have been with Express Travel for more than 15 years.

Today, the women and their full-service travel agency are widely recognized for their expertise and business acumen.

Ramudo was recently appointed to the U.S. Travel & Tourism Advisory Board by Secretary of Commerce John E. Bryson. The American Society of Travel Agents named her its 2011 Agent of the Year. Ramudo also received the 2009 Advocacy Award from the Interactive Travel Services Association. Express Travel ranks in the Top 100 Hispanic Businesses, recognized by Hispanic Business magazine. And South Florida Business Journal named Express Travel the fifth most successful women-owned business in Dade County.

With 60 percent corporate and 40 percent leisure clients, the agency offers five lines of business: corporate, vacation, cruise, study abroad, and meetings and events. This diversity allows the agency to meet any travel need. The women focus on different aspects of the business. Ramudo manages and represents Express Travel in the community and industry organizations, while Jacomino oversees day-to-day operations. Although Delgado is semi-retired, she still works four days a week tending to customer needs.

Nearly a quarter-century after founding the business, they maintain the enthusiasm of new entrepreneurs and still work more than 60 hours a week. Even so, Ramudo and Jacomino make time for their grown

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children (in Miami and New York City) and celebrate holidays with extended family (as many as 80 people). Both love to travel to Spain, the home of their ancestors, and to Italy. As for Delgado, she doesn’t travel as frequently nowadays since she prefers to spend time with her family which includes five children and 13 grandchildren.

Ramudo and Jacomino credit their business sense and work ethic to their parents’ example. Just two months after Fidel Castro assumed power in Cuba, their father sold everything, packed up his family and moved to Miami. He enrolled in college to learn English and began a career as a home builder.

Delgado learned much from her family as well. Her father was a well-known attorney, who advocated for Cuban-American citizens, instilling great love and respect for family and country.

CLIENTS LOVE EXPRESS TRAVEL

Miami’s residents and travelers often have varied interests in arts and culture. Express Travel serves clients across the spectrum, whether they book four-day economy packages, luxury tours or something between. The agency is relationship-driven, so it’s no surprise Express Travel has what Jacomino calls “the most appreciative clients ever.”

And here’s where the cereal comes in. A client booked a $20,000 cruise and learned, to his chagrin, his favorite cereal would not be available for breakfasts at sea. Delgado bought four boxes of the cereal and drove to Fort Lauderdale, where she boarded the ship and asked the staff to serve the cereal to her client.

And then there’s the Brazilian businessman who regularly books U.S. trips through Express Travel. After he conducts business meetings in Detroit, he stops in Miami at an Express Travel agent’s home to pull his golf clubs out of storage. Then he’s ready to hit the south Florida links.

Tools from Sabre help Express Travel agents deliver on their service promise.

Sabre’s industry-leading customer relationship management system, ClientBase®, helps them truly personalize their customer interactions, ensuring that client preferences are top-of-mind for all agents. This information allows Express Travel agents to provide their signature personal touch. Does the client want a certain hotel room? Does he or she prefer mid-morning flights or mid-size cars versus compacts? The easy-to-use interface of ClientBase increases efficiency, reduces errors and allows agents to interact with clients rather than just gather information.

Jacomino also encourages her agents to use powerful mobile tools from Sabre, which let Express Travel clients access itineraries, receive flight notifications and request driving directions from computers or mobile devices.

Agents at Express Travel appreciate Sabre’s accurate pricing for smaller airlines, an area that once was difficult to track and the source of major headaches.

“Sabre has an awesome system of updating applications and communicating with us,” Jacomino said. “The information they send out is very helpful. And the technology is great.”

Jacomino also appreciates the support the agency receives from Sabre’s Global Customer Support Center.

“We feel good about our position in the marketplace. There are always people willing to pay for friendly help, expert advice, and to get things done,” Ramudo said.

With its strong relationships and state-of-the-art Sabre technology, Express Travel will remain a travel industry leader for the long haul.